

The Heart *of the* School



In Iowa's Van Meter Community School District, the library takes its rightful place at the center of the learning matrix

By Lauren Barack

ABOUT 21 MILES WEST OF DES MOINES, SHANNON MILLER IS RENOWNED FOR putting her school library front and center for any learning moment on campus and for helping to create a collaborative conclave where K–12 students and teachers—and, of course, Miller herself—buzz within an educational hive. But Miller, district librarian and technology specialist for Iowa's Van Meter Community School District, never expected that her fiefdom would literally morph into the physical heart of the K–12 school...until now.

At the core of an upcoming multimillion-dollar renovation, Van Meter's library will grow into a 2500-square-foot space planted right in the middle of the school. For Miller, the project is the ultimate opportunity to get all of her students together in a learning cacophony—which is just how she likes it.

"One thing I can't wait for is a space where we are all together," says Miller, whose own son is a third grader at the school. "I love it when the library is crazy and super noisy. I can't wait to have more collaboration. It will be even better."

Currently, Van Meter serves 852 K–12 students in one building. The main structure was built in 1928, with multiple additions made to that hub over decades. As the librarian for the entire district, Miller serves all students across every grade, from the upper-school students to the lower-school ones, each with their own library on the main floor connected by Miller's office in the middle. She divides her time between the two libraries, each so small that neither can fit much more than one class at one time, says Janelle Thompson, Van Meter's instructional strategist and assistant principal.

Enter a bond passed by the community this past April that granted the school district \$7.8 million for multi-

ple upgrades—affording Van Meter the opportunity to carve new space from old. The mantle fell to architect Johnny Boyd, who jumped at the chance to bring the school into the 21st century, aligning the physical space with the educational path that stakeholders, including Miller, are setting the school on today.

Boyd started his work by spending time with Miller as she bounced from space to space. Miller would help students blog in one area, then conduct a Skype interview with authors in another. Sometimes Boyd would find students packed in Miller's office recording content that would later be mixed into a podcast, just one of myriad projects she's launched at the school.

"Johnny started out just interviewing me, asking, 'What would you have in your space if you could, if nothing was holding you back? What would you have for your kids?'" she says. "When he would come into

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE LITCHFIELD.

In the halls of Van Meter's secondary school, teacher librarian Shannon Miller reviews the initial blueprints for the new library space with architect Johnny Boyd.

A Wish List for Learning

AS VAN METER BEGAN TO DRAFT PLANS FOR ITS NEW LIBRARY, teacher librarian Shannon Miller lost no time in crafting her wish list for the architect, Johnny Boyd. At the top? Flexibility, some creativity, and lots of digital play space for students. In particular, she hopes for:

1. Movable shelves, preferably on wheels, along with walls that can be changed around to open up more space for students, and lots of oval and round tables at which they can work together.
2. A maker space stocked with LEGOs, recycled materials, art supplies, tools to make and record music, and even MakerBot 3-D printers, for which she has already applied through the DonorsChoose program (<http://ow.ly/rK8Pc>).
3. Comfortable seating and work areas for students, including high-top tables and chairs, couches, soft chairs, and smaller, lightweight chairs "for the little ones," Miller says.
4. Window displays and nooks where books and resources—even digital ones—can be highlighted; these spaces should be accessible from the inside but also seen from outside of library.
5. A technology wonderland: Everything from green screen areas for creating visual effects to a soundproof booth, along with dedicated space to connect virtually with others complete with a movable screen, mounted speakers, and a projector.
6. Charging stations, so students and teachers will feel free to come into the library to charge their devices whenever they need to.
7. Creative collaboration. Miller envisions a space where students can brainstorm ideas, where they can get messy and creative without worrying about paint on the walls or surfaces.

Miller says, "Now we'll have a space designed just for these opportunities that we have been doing for the last five years, taking our school library outside of the four walls and into the world."

my office, he would see the students collaborating or recording and say, 'I see what you're using your space for because there is no other space.'"

Finding room for such creative endeavors with students will no longer be an issue when the renovations are complete. Plans call for a new gymnasium as well as upgrades to the current gym to allow it to house fine arts performances. There will also be subtle adjustments to nearly every corner of the school, from closet spaces to classrooms, the cafeteria to hallways.

And of course there's the library. Every inch of the structure was considered in order to build in as much elbow room as possible for students, teachers, and Miller. And while the building will not be a completely new structure, the collective changes should make the space feel transformational to the school's community.

Dashing new digs

The soon-to-be-constructed new library will contain collaboration areas, recording rooms, and, of course, books. An Internet café will round out the renovation project. There, high school students will be able to order up a macchiato while doing homework, working on an interactive class project or, yes, even reading.

Retractable glass will make up some of the walls, allowing the school to create even larger spaces as needs arise, such as when big groups work together in the library at the same time as an entire class is learning there. There will be room for all. Tables will be more versatile, creating bigger work stations that can move more easily to accommodate students' needs, and charging stations will be peppered throughout the space for all their technology.

Even with all the planned details, Miller says the design goals are still very fluid as the start of construction is some months away. At the end of the last school year, for



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example, a separate space planned for using Nooks had shifted to a maker space, she says. That's in keeping with Miller's style—there's no status quo in her library. Projects change, spaces change, priorities change. The library will reflect her and the school's quest of offering students the best educational surroundings to support their learning today.

At a time when public and school libraries are fighting to make their relevance understood to state and district authorities, Van Meter may be something of an anomaly. Communities may rally around a public branch or school library during times of disasters. But putting the library directly in the physical center of the school—and funding that choice—makes a statement that stakeholders in Van Meter care about the library and know its relevance to students.

"The library tends to be the heartbeat of our school," says Thompson. "It's just a happening place."

As an instructional technologist, Thompson works with Van Meter's students who both meet and do not meet proficiency. She's particularly excited about the potential of the library expansion to impact student achievement, as she often sees students heading down to the library, learning a new skill, and then not having the time—or the space—to go back and work on strengthening that expertise with Miller.

Thompson believes the expansion, at its best, will allow more groups of students to enjoy the library's resources simultaneously. And while Miller can't be in every place at once, she'll have more opportunity to pop in, give a few pointers, and touch base with teachers before hopping to the next group.

"Kids are going to want to be in this new space," says Deron Durflinger, superintendent and secondary principal for grades 6 through 12. Durflinger tends to downplay the word "library" as it lends people to envision a space that is "quiet, with lots of books and aisles," he says. Instead, he likes to refer to the space as "information central," a nerve center for everyone at Van Meter.

Integrating tech tools

Plans call for students, educators—and, ideally, even parents—to be able to rely on the library as a kind of learning matrix, discovering new ways to integrate technology into their lives and the school's curriculum. "Information Central" will be one of the first spaces parents see when they enter the newly renovated space.

"We don't think of this as a Carnegie Library built in the 1900s," says Durflinger. "We want to see it as a central place where kids will want to be actively searching for resources, using resources, or having a fun place to



Shannon Miller gets a hug from a first-grade student as the class prepares to participate in a Skype demonstration.

be to work together. To have those resources, and Shannon, to get the support they need for whatever project they're doing."

Van Meter is already a one-to-one school in terms of devices and computers, and technology will continue to be core to the new library—and to Miller's focus. She is considered something of a technology mixologist—weaving Internet-based tools fluidly and thoughtfully into the school's curriculum. Her students are just as likely to utilize apps such as ThingLink and Animoto in their classwork as a pencil. Miller rarely considers a new app without imaging the way it can enhance the curriculum at Van Meter.

Whether that's kindergarteners using iPads, third graders downloading clip art, or sixth graders using EasyBib to create citations, Miller is everywhere weaving digital tools—and digital citizenship—into the library, student work, and the school.

The new space will support even more of this interactivity and digital learning. Construction isn't scheduled until late spring or early June 2014, so the community is still voicing its ideas on how they imagine the space being used when the doors open—ideally in August 2015 for the first day of school. Until then, stakeholders will be anxiously waiting to see that physical reflection of the learning happening at Van Meter.

"Our library is already different than traditional libraries," says Durflinger. "This will be an area where kids can come together and fit into our mission of personalized learning for each student today, and for tomorrow."

Lauren Barack (laurenbarack.com) writes about the connections between media, education, and technology.